

Strategy Research Project

Commanding in Chief, Strategic Leader Relationships in the Civil War

by

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**COMMANDING IN CHIEF,
STRATEGIC LEADER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CIVIL WAR**

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COMMANDING IN CHIEF, STRATEGIC LEADER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CIVIL WAR

A critical component of military success is the relationship between civilian and military leaders. Most essential is the degree of rapport between the President and senior military officers during times of conflict. Effective working relations between the constitutional Commander-in-Chief and uniformed military leaders have proved an enduring challenge throughout United States history. This paper looks at the bonds between presidents and generals during the American Civil War of 1861-1865. Specifically, the study explores the professional and personal relationship between President Abraham Lincoln and two of his leading army commanders, Major Generals George B. McClellan and John Pope. The paper examines a fundamental question of strategic leader relationships: what leads a President to place trust in a senior military leader in wartime and what factors contribute to the President retaining or losing that confidence in the military commander. The paper also draws insight and conclusions from these Civil War strategic leader relationships that serve as relevant considerations for today's governmental and military strategic leaders.

Integral to this paper is the topic of civilian control of the military in the United States, more specifically the role of the President as Commander in Chief. The country's founding fathers engaged the issue while framing the United States Constitution. Wary of a military capable of usurping governmental power and equally fearful of bestowing exclusive control of the military on a single government body, the Constitution established civilian oversight of the nation's military force while ensuring the separation of responsibilities for management of the armed forces. The Constitution

provided the legislative branch the authority to build and fund the military as well as the power to declare war. Alternatively, the Constitution entrusted the power to “wage war and command and control the armed forces of the nation in both peace and war” to the Executive Branch by establishing the President as Commander in Chief.¹

The Commander in Chief clause contained in Article II of the Constitution provided the President with title of “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.”² The clause, however, did not specify the duties or powers of the President as Commander in Chief. As a result, power exercised by a Commander in Chief has been subject to interpretation and debate between legislators and Chief Executives throughout our nation’s history, ranging from views of “extremely broad power to conduct war to a narrowly restricted power of military command.”³ Though this debate has little urgency during times of peace, the power exercised by a Commander in Chief in times of conflict is frequently at the forefront of the national debate.

While not specific in its definition of the position’s duties, the Commander in Chief clause did establish a hierarchal command structure for the armed forces, one that subordinated all uniformed members of the military to the authority of the Commander in Chief. The intentional selection of the term *Commander in Chief* rather than the previous appellation of *General in Chief* used by the Continental Congress reinforced the principle of a civilian leader rather than a uniformed officer at the head of the military. The framers of the Constitution most likely intended the role of Commander in Chief as a de facto civilian magistrate for the military. In this sense, the President would

oversee the institution, providing guidance and direction, while leaving the employment of military forces in the hands of subordinate military leaders. The equivocalness of the Commander in Chief clause, however, allowed wide interpretation of Presidential authority in military matters. Additionally, there was little “distinction between political and military competence” before the Civil War, and it was common for politicians to assume duties as military commanders in times of conflict.⁴ Even Nineteenth Century Commanders in Chief serving during times of war were occasionally present on the battlefield with their army or assisted in formulating or overseeing the military strategy of their armed forces.⁵

As an alternative to directly leading the military, the Commander in Chief maintains the authority to appoint senior military leaders to positions of high command and responsibility. The Commander in Chief’s selection of senior generals or admirals reflects trust and confidence in the abilities of those officers to employ the military element of national power in support of national objectives. Additionally, the generals or admirals appointed by the Commander in Chief provide military counsel and recommendations which inform the President during the policy making process and which advise him on the employment of military power in support of national strategy. Moreover, the President looks to his senior military leaders to develop military strategy and direct the employment of forces to achieve desired national aims. A Commander in Chief must possess confidence in the abilities and competence of the generals or admirals he selects and must choose officers with whom he can establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect.

The crucible of the Civil War would help lead toward a more professional military in the United States and would eventually result in less involvement in military matters by Presidents and more reliance on their appointed military officers to employ the military element of power for the nation. The expeditionary nature of American warfare in conflicts following the Civil War would not only reinforce this evolution, it would necessitate it. However, the distinction between military officer and political leader was much less clear in 1861, when civil war threatened the country and an unproven Commander in Chief named Abraham Lincoln ascended to the office of the Presidency.

Republican Candidate Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office as the 16th President of the United States amid the darkening clouds of war that loomed on the horizon. Only forty days into his administration, the United States became embroiled in a conflict that would define his presidency and redefine the nation. Lincoln's unassuming demeanor led many observers to view him as unfit for the Presidency, and his dearth of military experience made him appear to be a dubious choice to serve as Commander in Chief in a time of crucial conflict. To Lincoln, the nexus of the conflict rested on the constitutional right of a state to secede from the Union and he was adamant in his conviction that secession was unconstitutional. In fact, this constitutional conviction provided the "premise on which all his other political beliefs rested."⁶

In addition to a divided country, Lincoln inherited a government ill prepared to handle the crisis of secession or the subsequent perils of civil war. The President's administration was an amalgamation of political supporters and rivals, including several appointees mandated to Lincoln by the campaign promises and arrangements of his campaign managers. Like the government, Lincoln also inherited a military unready for

the demands of war. The military, untested in battle for more than a decade, relied extensively on state militias, with a federal Regular Army force numbering only sixteen thousand soldiers at the beginning of the war.⁷ The rapid expansion of the Union Army in 1861 required a swift acceleration of officer promotions that necessitated relying on an inexperienced nucleus of commanders at regimental and higher levels. As Commanding General of the Army Winfield Scott remarked at the outbreak of the war, “We have captains and lieutenants, that, with time and experience, will develop, and will do good service.”⁸ Unfortunately, it would take months of bloody combat for the Union to reap the benefits of that service.

A seemingly unrefined and awkward Chief Executive, Lincoln actually proved to be tremendously effective. He repeatedly demonstrated an incredible genius that could sway an opponent’s acrimony into faithful support of the President’s views. Lincoln also possessed tremendous insight into the constitutional powers afforded the office of the Presidency and aptly used the authority in his crusade to restore the Union. As Commander in Chief, Lincoln in essence coined the term *war powers* and defined its meaning. He first used the words in an address to Congress early in the war, and he demonstrated “the phrase and its application” throughout his Presidency.⁹ Indeed, Lincoln’s inception and expansion of Presidential war powers throughout the Civil War established precedents that later Commanders in Chief would invoke in times of crisis.¹⁰ It was Lincoln’s strategic leadership during a time of “far greater conflict that combined the most dangerous aspects of an internal war and a war against another nation” that would see the divided country restored as a nation, but only after four grueling years of war.¹¹

In July 1861, the inexperience of the Union Army resulted in an abysmal defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run. Clearly, ending the Southern insurrection would not be a simple or easily resolved matter, and the fight required stronger military leadership. Consequently, President Lincoln appointed Major General George B. McClellan commander of the Union Army's Division of the Potomac (reorganized in August 1861 as the Union Army of the Potomac). Less than four months later, Lincoln appointed McClellan as General in Chief of the Union Army, succeeding the army's ranking officer, Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, and culminating a meteoric rise to the top of the ranks by one of the army's youngest generals. At a time when the Union Army's leadership teemed with inexperience, Lincoln saw tremendous potential in McClellan, and the President hoped McClellan's appointment would bring stabilizing leadership to the army and turn the tide of the conflict in the Union's favor.

McClellan's promotion to army command and to the Generalcy in Chief resulted in large measure from a strong reputation earned through military service prior to the Civil War. He matriculated to West Point at age fifteen and entered military service in 1846 after graduating second in his class. He served admirably in the Mexican War, followed by a tour in Europe, where he observed the immediate aftermath of the Crimean War. During his eleven years in the army, McClellan gained renown for a strong military mind, developing a new cavalry saddle for the service, and authoring cavalry tactics manuals as well as an extensive report on the siege of Sebastopol from his days in Europe.¹² McClellan left military service in 1857 to pursue civilian endeavors in the railroad industry, where he worked for the Illinois Central Railroad before becoming President of the Eastern Division of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad

Company.¹³ His experience in that industry provided McClellan a valuable understanding of a transportation platform that would factor prominently in the war ahead. More importantly, his time with the Illinois Central Railroad in the late 1850s brought him into contact with Abraham Lincoln, an attorney working for the same company, and the two shared occasional evenings together while representing the company's legal matters.¹⁴

McClellan returned to military service at the outbreak of the Civil War and, because of his previous reputation, several Governors sought his service in leading their state militias.¹⁵ His training of Ohio militia units garnered Lincoln's confidence and resulted in appointment as a Major General in the Regular Army and assignment as Commander of the Department of the Ohio. In short order McClellan skyrocketed to second in seniority among all generals of the Union Army, behind only Winfield Scott, the Commanding General of the United States Army.¹⁶ McClellan further earned Lincoln's confidence by winning victories in two early battles in the western part of Virginia. These victories gained the general substantial renown in the media and came at a most opportune time for the nation and for McClellan. Following the crushing defeat of Union forces at First Bull Run, Lincoln was in desperate need of a general who could bring the Union victories and quiet the growing fears of the Northern public. More importantly, the Union needed a commander who could organize and train a raw and disordered army. McClellan's earlier success in the west, including a penchant for organizing and training soldiers, made him, in Lincoln's eyes, the ideal choice to lead the Army of the Potomac in the war's Eastern Theater.¹⁷

Buttressing Lincoln's confidence in McClellan was strong political support for the general from high-ranking government officials, including members of Lincoln's cabinet. Leading the political charge for McClellan's appointment was Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, a former Ohio Governor, who favored McClellan as a result of his service with the Ohio militia and who had previously championed McClellan's Regular Army appointment at the beginning of the war.¹⁸ A member of the Democratic Party, McClellan also gained the support of influential Democrats in bolstering his standing with the Republican administration. Lincoln, most likely, saw value in appointing a general from the opposition party to such a prestigious military position and leveraged the appointment as a means to gain support from Northern Democrats in Congress.¹⁹

In addition to political backing, McClellan rode a wave of favorable media support in ascending to army command and in gaining Lincoln's favor to succeed Winfield Scott as the Union Army's senior officer. While ably performing the task of organizing his army into a formidable fighting force, McClellan also provided Lincoln a grand strategy for employing the entire Union Army to defeat the Confederacy, using his Army of the Potomac as the centerpiece. Not content with these contributions, McClellan intimated through media and political channels that the army command structure at senior levels detracted from his strategy; in lieu of the current structure he advocated a streamlined chain of command that would have fewer intermediaries between him and the Commander in Chief.²⁰ On 1 November 1861, trusting McClellan's military genius and desiring a more direct line of communication, Lincoln appointed him as General in Chief of the Union Army while also retaining him as Army of the Potomac Commander. In appointing McClellan to the two most important positions of the army, Lincoln

established a pivotal civil-military relationship with McClellan, one that would prove fundamental to the Union's prosecution of the war throughout the next year and a half. Indeed, the bond between Lincoln and McClellan would be crucial to the Union and would place an indelible stamp on Lincoln's tenure as Commander in Chief.

In McClellan, Lincoln believed he had found a general who would achieve his vision for quickly ending the war and restoring the Union. Lincoln expected McClellan to hastily transform the inexperienced army and take the fight to the Confederates with overwhelming superiority in manpower and material. Lincoln viewed McClellan as being without equal in ability to train and organize an army, a confidence McClellan would twice prove worthy of as Army of the Potomac Commander. With the Union capital under threat of Confederate attack as the result of the defeat at First Bull Run, McClellan used his skills as an engineer to promptly establish formidable defenses around Washington. He then turned his attention to bringing order out of chaos by restoring the fighting spirit to a demoralized force and by organizing new recruits into a cohesive army.

Lincoln viewed the Confederate Army as the Confederacy's center of gravity and charged McClellan with the task of crushing that army. Lincoln desired an offensive spirit in the Union Army; he believed the North could not win the war by simply seizing and holding Southern territory.²¹ In Lincoln's mind, Union success rested on the ability to thoroughly defeat the Confederate Army through a combination of coordinated attacks across the geographic perimeter of the war.²² This strategy would maximize the Union advantage in manpower and resources by placing pressure on the entire Confederate war effort and preventing the Southern Army from repositioning assets along interior

lines. Lincoln also envisioned the vigorous pursuit of Confederate forces throughout Southern territory to maintain the pressure on the Rebel Army and rapidly exhaust Southern military resources. Furthermore, Lincoln knew a prolonged campaign would embolden Southern resolve and erode Northern public and political support.

Consequently, he asked McClellan for military strategy and tactical execution to achieve decisive battlefield victories in order to bring a rapid close to the conflict and to facilitate the President's national strategic objective of reunification.

Lincoln desired an open and ongoing dialogue with his General in Chief that facilitated the formulation of strategic policy and supporting military strategy. Like War Presidents before him, Lincoln viewed the development of military strategy as inherently linked to strategic policy -- a collaborative effort between Commander in Chief and General in Chief. In appointing McClellan General in Chief, Lincoln expected the general to formulate sound military strategy that supported the President's national strategic aims. As General in Chief, McClellan reported directly to Lincoln. Occasionally, but not always, he also communicated with the Secretary of War, initially Simon Cameron and after January 1862, Edwin Stanton. No longer having to render reports through Scott simplified the lines of communication and facilitated the policy-strategy discussion between the general and his civilian leaders. The advent of the telegraph also strengthened Lincoln's ability to maintain communications with McClellan, not only around Washington but also in the field. Indeed, during major battles Lincoln "almost lived at the telegraph office," transmitting numerous messages a day to McClellan, sometimes to communicate his intent and always to remain attuned to ongoing military operations.²³

The bond between a Commander in Chief and his senior ranking general in a time of war is arguably the most critical of any relationship in government. This was especially true in 1861, when the strategic leadership tandem of President Lincoln and General McClellan embarked on a quest to rejoin a severed nation armed with only an inexperienced military and a callow and unproven administration. As alarm spread across Union States and the seeds of confidence took root in the upstart Confederacy, the stakes were high for both Lincoln and McClellan, and the fate of a nation hung in the balance. Failure to quickly extinguish the flames of Southern rebellion increased the chance of intervention in the conflict by foreign governments, which would lead to the recognition and legitimacy of an independent South. Lincoln's appointment of McClellan as army commander and later General in Chief demonstrated the investment of considerable trust in the general. Likewise, the President's expectations of McClellan were equally weighty. McClellan's difficulty in living up to this trust and in meeting these expectations, both professionally and personally, during his year and a half in command ultimately led to the downfall of his civil-military relationship with Lincoln.

Lincoln and McClellan arrived at the pinnacle of Union command from distinctly different backgrounds. Lincoln, an unassuming, self-taught, country lawyer from Illinois became Commander in Chief with little military background. In contrast, McClellan, the well-educated product of a socially upper-class family, viewed politicians with disdain and had "demonstrated a certain contentiousness with higher authority" throughout his career in the military and civilian employment.²⁴ Lincoln was cordial and inviting to nearly anyone he encountered, spending hours of each day of his Presidency entertaining citizens' concerns at the White House. McClellan was strongly opinionated,

obdurate in his views and rarely capable of changing his mind on a subject once he formulated a stance. He maintained a circle of “deep-rooted” friends who shared his views, and he intensely rejected anyone who questioned or disagreed with his opinion.²⁵ Under this inauspicious context, the seeds of a crucial strategic leadership bond between a general and his civilian superior had difficulty taking root.

The relationship between Lincoln and McClellan began with high aspirations on the part of the President. As with many of his subordinates, Lincoln conveyed his support for McClellan by using a manner of humility and communications that imparted a paternalistic tone of encouragement. Despite holding the superior office and title, Lincoln frequently traveled to McClellan’s headquarters to meet with his general instead of summoning McClellan to the White House. Lincoln’s written correspondence to McClellan was commonly suggestive in nature, rarely containing language of direct orders or explicit directives. When he appointed McClellan General in Chief, Lincoln cautioned him “long and earnestly” about the added responsibility he was assuming and advised the general to “enlarge the sphere of his thoughts and feel the weight of the occasion” while “conferring with me as far as necessary.”²⁶ Trusting McClellan’s aptitude as a military commander, Lincoln deferred to the general on military matters, even so far as defending the general’s deliberate methods for preparation of the army in late 1861 to Senators and Congressmen who were anxious over the army’s inaction.

While Lincoln sought a mutual bond of trust and confidence with his General in Chief, McClellan was reluctant to engage his civilian superior in a similar manner. Highly critical of Lincoln, and equally critical of the President’s cabinet, McClellan viewed politicians as obstacles rather than advocates for his military expeditions. He held

strong and skeptical views of civilian participation in military affairs, and he believed the decision to engage in war inherently transferred the matter of policy from the hands of politicians to the sole purview of generals. Additionally, because of their vastly different upbringing, McClellan viewed himself as Lincoln's intellectual, social, and cultural superior.²⁷ This aristocratic air of superiority greatly inhibited his relationship with Lincoln from its inception and blinded McClellan to seeing Lincoln's brilliance as a War President.²⁸ As a result, McClellan continuously resisted Lincoln's overtures of support and collaboration and chose instead to view the President as a nuisance and a distraction to the general's concept of the proper prosecution of the war.²⁹

Despite the difficulty he found in dealing with superiors, McClellan engendered an intensely loyal following from subordinates, earning him a historian's moniker as the "worst subordinate and best superior" to ever serve the army.³⁰ McClellan possessed a charisma that inspired deep abiding respect and loyalty among the officers and soldiers of his command. He was, in one historian's opinion, "perhaps the most popular general ever to command American troops."³¹ When Lincoln appointed him General in Chief in 1861, the President, no doubt, saw that "the men had for this general a devotion which they gave no other man."³² In 1862, Lincoln identified the devotion of McClellan's soldiers as the reason for placing McClellan in overall command of forces around Washington following yet another Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run. "McClellan has the army with him," remarked the President in response to criticism by his own Cabinet members.³³ Lincoln valued the spirit and morale McClellan imbued in the army, and the President remained hopeful the general would eventually overcome his cautious approach that routinely stalled the force from joining battle. This would not

be the case, however, and although the army may have still been with McClellan, Lincoln's support for the general rapidly dwindled.

McClellan's efforts at organizing and training the Army of the Potomac were, no doubt, pleasing to Lincoln, but the general's continued reluctance to employ the Union force against the Confederate Army ultimately took a toll on the President's patience. As their strategic partnership continued into 1862, Lincoln became more demanding of McClellan to deliver decisive military action in support of national strategy. McClellan, though, responded with continued delays and frequent requests for additional resources. McClellan's inactivity caused the President to assume an increased role in the formulation of military strategy, an effort McClellan stubbornly resisted as naïve effrontery on the part of the administration. Lincoln no longer deferred to the general on military matters but began suggesting military options for employing the army to McClellan. When McClellan finally proposed a military strategy for the Peninsula Campaign, Lincoln only begrudgingly accepted it despite believing a campaign to break the Confederate Army in Northern Virginia the wiser path to winning the war. The relationship between Lincoln and McClellan was growing more divergent, as noted by the President's personal secretary William O. Stoddard, who observed, "the President has the deeper, wiser, broader, stronger mind of the two.... and he will surely win the long wrestling match."³⁴

Indeed, Lincoln would persevere in the strategic tug of war between the two leaders, but in truth, there would be no winners in the contest. In the end, McClellan failed to deliver on the expectations Lincoln set for him, and Lincoln did not find the general who could implement a military strategy that supported his evolving national

strategic vision. McClellan's fall from Lincoln's grace was steep, although somewhat protracted. McClellan was initially relieved of duties as General in Chief just as he was launching the Peninsula Campaign in March 1862. Lincoln elevated those responsibilities to the level of the President and Secretary of War, while McClellan retained command of the Army of Potomac for another eight months. He followed the unsuccessful Peninsula Campaign with a strategic victory at the Battle of Antietam but failed to capitalize on the victory, and his subsequent inactivity resulted in Lincoln relieving him from command of the Army of the Potomac in November 1862. Thereafter, Lincoln marginalized McClellan and effectively ended the general's career by ordering him to repair to New Jersey to await further orders, though none would come during the remainder of the war. McClellan remained on military rolls until resigning in November of 1864, but Lincoln had relegated him far from the battlefield after nearly seventeen tumultuous months. McClellan was out of the picture for good, and Lincoln again was in need of a general to bring the Union victory.

There are several reasons why the strategic partnership between Lincoln and McClellan did not succeed, and in retrospect, it is plausible to suggest the relationship's failure may have been inevitable. McClellan's staggering rise to command placed him at the highest levels of the army at a very young age and without the experience of commanding at lower echelons. Even his triumphs in western Virginia at the war's onset came "too easily," and as a result, in his own mind McClellan was "readily convinced he was a great soldier."³⁵ Moreover, McClellan's tenure as army commander and General in Chief occurred during the critical first year of the Civil War at the period when the Union, and more importantly, its Commander in Chief were still struggling with the

concept of an internecine war. The combination of an inexperienced general, President, and public offered the Union but a small glimmer of hope for achieving quick and easy victory.

Another reason for Lincoln's loss of confidence in McClellan was the two men's inability to establish the mutual bonds of trust and respect essential for an effective partnership between Commander in Chief and senior military general. Although both men share the blame for this failure, McClellan's unwillingness to accept Lincoln as a superior undercut their strategic partnership and significantly impaired the relationship. McClellan often displayed a blatant lack of personal respect for Lincoln throughout their association. Additionally, the pretentious attitude McClellan held for Lincoln prevented him from ever engaging the President as an intellectual or social equal in their strategic bond.

McClellan's conduct as a military officer was likewise frequently egregious, and his professional relationship with the President at times bordered on insubordination. McClellan showed disrespect for the President by failing to adhere to the established superior-subordinate relationship between a general and the Constitutional Commander in Chief. McClellan overstepped the boundaries of his position in repeated attempts to impose his views of national policy on the President instead of restricting his advice to the employment of military forces in support of national strategy objectives. A letter presented to Lincoln at Harrison's Landing in July 1862 near the end of the unsuccessful Peninsula Campaign proffered McClellan's ideas of grand strategic policy objectives for the war but provided little indication as to how the general intended to tactically defeat the enemy to his front.³⁶ McClellan's lack of battlefield victories

aggravated these misdeeds; as historian T. Harry Williams commented, “Only generals who win great victories should presume to counsel their political superiors about policy.”³⁷

In addition to a lack of mutual trust, Lincoln and McClellan suffered from ineffective communications throughout their strategic relationship. Lincoln was unsuccessful in attempts to convey intent to McClellan by the use of suggestively worded communications. Lincoln’s approach lacked direct, specific guidance for the general, and McClellan was unable or unwilling to act on Lincoln’s subtle but indirect missives. When Lincoln did communicate orders in a direct manner, McClellan received them with indifference, often retorting with lengthy rebuttals that illuminated his disdain for the President’s judgment and discounted the merit of the directives.

Likewise, McClellan lacked the willingness to communicate with the Commander in Chief. He withheld military strategy from Lincoln for fear that politicians of the President’s Cabinet, who McClellan believed conspired against him, would compromise his war plans. Additionally, information McClellan did provide to Lincoln lacked requisite detail and specificity to be of substantial value to the President. Besides his reluctance to inform Lincoln, McClellan had a habit of sensationalizing the battlefield reports he provided the War Department. He frequently overstated the significance or degree of battlefield victories while minimizing the impact of battles lost. A systemic problem of intelligence gathering in his command led to vastly exaggerated reports of enemy strengths, and as a result, requests for additional manpower and supplies frequently accompanied those reports.

Though Lincoln managed to overlook McClellan's personal and professional slights and even accepted the general's misleading battlefield reports, the Commander in Chief unequivocally required a senior military commander who shared a common vision of national policy and was equally committed to the Union's cause. The lack of strategic synergy in guiding the Union's prosecution of the war was a manifestation of the lack of trust between Lincoln and McClellan as well as a by-product of their ineffective communications. Disagreement over the war's strategic ends, ways and means proved the most cogent reason for Lincoln's loss of confidence in McClellan, and it created an obstacle neither man could surmount. Northern success rested on the bedrock of a strategic accord between Commander in Chief and General in Chief, or at the very least, required McClellan to subordinate personal views and aspirations in favor of those espoused by his civilian superior. Instead, the two men differed greatly on their approach to the war.

Throughout the war, Lincoln remained steadfast in his commitment to the strategic end of reunification, the goal that guided his every action. When he realized that the means and ways used during the first year of the war had not achieved this end, he adopted a new strategic policy predicated on a "principle that the Southerners were enemies to be vanquished, rather than brothers to be conciliated."³⁸ This new hard-war policy meant the North would "avail ourselves of every necessary measure to maintain the Union."³⁹ The Emancipation Proclamation exhibited the pragmatism of Lincoln's new approach. It abolished slavery inside Confederate lines not as a political or moral statement but rather as a measure taken to bring the hard edge of war to the Confederacy. Slave labor supported the Southern economy and, accordingly, the

Confederate ability to wage war. In eliminating slavery, Lincoln pursued a strategy designed to cripple the Southern economy and end the war. Additionally, by the middle of 1862, Lincoln had come to understand that commonly accepted protocols and Christian traditions of modern warfare were insufficient and that “the war is to be carried on and put through by hard, tough fighting that will hurt somebody.”⁴⁰

McClellan could not bring himself to the same realizations as his Commander in Chief. Resolute in his opinion that “he and he alone was capable of conducting the war in all its aspects”, McClellan remained adamant that a “hard-war” policy on the part of the Union would further aggravate Confederate hatred of the North to a point that reunification would be unattainable.⁴¹ McClellan instead preferred a conciliatory approach for the war, one where the “hard hand of war must be kept gloved” and institutions such as slavery remained unmolested.⁴² He preferred to prosecute the war in a manner that restrained destructive force and focused only on defeating the secessionist movement, a movement McClellan misjudged to be a vocal but minority opinion among the Southern population. In McClellan’s view, eliminating the secessionist movement would awaken the South’s suppressed Unionist movement, which would lead to an end of hostilities and calls for reunification from seceded states whose institutions, and infrastructure remained intact.

His military strategy supported these conciliatory views and reflected the European warfare style he had observed during the Crimean War. Most likely, this contributed to McClellan’s preference for a large, well-equipped army that “would make it possible to carefully control the conditions under which campaigns were conducted to ensure the actual clash of arms would be short, decisive, and successful.”⁴³ McClellan

was reluctant to engage in the frontal assaults and bloody clashes that Lincoln realized were necessary for victory. He preferred maneuver to direct engagement and viewed the seizure of territory as a supreme military objective while Lincoln held the destruction of the Confederate Army as the essential military aim. In both his political assessment of the South and his strategic military objectives, McClellan was incorrect and, more importantly, incongruous with the views held by his Commander in Chief.

McClellan also failed to place personal aspirations behind service to country. He viewed himself as the Union's savior, the only leader capable of leading the North's war efforts -- a notion reinforced by his rapid ascension to command and the deeply devoted following of his soldiers. He even mused in private conversation with his wife that the country might require his service as dictator following the war.⁴⁴ McClellan held strong political views, supportive of the Democratic Party but in direct opposition to the views of the Administration he served. He willingly shared these views with political supporters, members of the press and subordinate officers, planting the seeds for a political campaign in later years. Lincoln saw no threat in McClellan as usurper or political rival. Instead, the President focused on McClellan's tremendous potential as a military commander and hoped the general would somehow find the way to bring the Union victory.

However, McClellan's reluctance in supporting the Army of Virginia under Major General John Pope in the summer of 1862 tipped the scales of Lincoln's patience and made it abundantly clear that McClellan's motives were self-centered and not in the best interest of the nation. McClellan sent Lincoln an ill-worded telegraph during the Second Battle of Bull Run that insinuated the general's desire to see his fellow army commander

lose the battle. McClellan's hesitance to provide reinforcement to Pope from the Army of the Potomac not only contributed to the defeat of Pope's Army, it allowed Confederate forces to threaten the Northern capital and to jeopardize the entire Union cause.

Lincoln, deeply troubled by McClellan's actions, commented, "there has been a design, a purpose in breaking down Pope, without regard of consequences to the country. It is shocking to see and know this...."⁴⁵ McClellan had committed an unconscionable transgression in Lincoln's eyes. Although McClellan would remain in command until November, the President had "come to see that the actions of a general reveal his character, and that it is character, not temporary success, or popularity with troops, that counts in the end."⁴⁶

The perceived victim of such transgression was Major General John Pope. His tenure as an army commander in the Eastern Theater was significantly briefer than that of McClellan's. Pope's command of the Army of Virginia spanned one major battle and lasted slightly longer than two months. Like McClellan, Pope gained Lincoln's confidence via a solid reputation as a military officer augmented by early exploits in the war's Western Theater. Additionally, Pope, like McClellan, benefited from the backing of Congressional politicians, notably Republicans who opposed McClellan. Where the two generals differed in their ascension to command was in their relationship with the Commander in Chief. Whereas McClellan never built positive relations with Lincoln prior to, or during, his time in command, Pope had cordial relations with the President from a relationship established with Lincoln well before the Civil War. Although both generals fell short of Lincoln's expectations as commanders in the Eastern Theater, their

performances contrasted widely, and Pope's subsequent career path followed a distinctly different course than that of his fellow army commander.

John Pope graduated from West Point in 1842 and embarked on an army career that spanned 44 years.⁴⁷ His service in the Mexican War and postwar years garnered him a solid reputation as a Topographical Engineer and earned him the prestigious selection from General Scott as one of four army officers that accompanied Lincoln's inaugural train from the Midwest to Washington in February 1861. An acquaintance of the President-elect from before the war, Pope was a fellow Illinoisan and a Republican who shared much in common with Lincoln. Both were raconteurs who may well have enjoyed frequent and jovial anecdotal conversation during the lengthy eastbound train ride that carried one to the Presidency and the other to a promotion to the rank of Brigadier General of Volunteers.⁴⁸ Lincoln also had some familiarity with Pope's family, having argued cases as a circuit lawyer in the district court of Pope's father and having made the acquaintance of Pope's father-in-law, a Congressman from Ohio.⁴⁹ Pope was a distant relative, through marriage, of the family of Lincoln's wife, and Pope could even boast an ancestral lineage to George Washington.⁵⁰ Without question, Lincoln's familiarity with Pope played a role in the general's appointment to command the Army of Virginia in 1862; however, what Lincoln admired even more was Pope's reputation as a fighter.⁵¹

Pope proved his military merit in the first year of the war by winning victories while commanding the Districts of North Missouri and Central Missouri and then by achieving greater acclaim in 1862 as commander of the Army of the Mississippi. In this command, he employed impressive strategies to win victories in the siege of New

Madrid and the battle of Island Number 10. These victories earned Pope a promotion to Major General. He then ably served under General Henry Halleck during the deliberate but victorious Union campaign at Corinth, Mississippi, where he successfully commanded the left wing of Halleck's force. Although some subordinates questioned that Pope deserved so much credit for victories in the Western Theater, the Northern press labeled him a general who liked to fight and lauded his aggressive, offensive spirit. Pope was energetic and courageous and "looked to be a comet in the coming war."⁵² Because of Pope's success and a dire need for assistance in directing military operations, Lincoln summoned him to Washington in June 1862 to serve as a military advisor.

Since McClellan's relief as General in Chief the previous March, Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton had assumed responsibility for developing military strategy and managing the employment of army units. While this arrangement promoted Lincoln's desire for a more offensive spirit to Union military strategy, the civilian leaders' efforts to direct the employment of forces showed their lack of experience in military matters. Lincoln's inadequate performance in guiding Union forces against General "Stonewall" Jackson's Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley hamstrung Union operations and illustrated his "unawareness of the problems of logistics and of the effect of hard marching upon troops."⁵³ The Commander in Chief needed sound military advice from a general "he knew, could rely on and who would fight."⁵⁴ Pope met all of these criteria, and his "advice was largely relied on by the President and Cabinet."⁵⁵

In addition to his success on the battlefield and counsel as a military advisor, Pope enjoyed strong support from an influential group of Congressional Republicans

who served on the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.⁵⁶ These radical Republicans had repeatedly attempted to remove McClellan from command and replace him with a general who held Republican views. As Lincoln and Stanton became convinced of the need for an additional army in the east to oppose the Confederate threat in Virginia, Republicans touted Pope as the best candidate to command the amassing army. Congressional Republicans saw an opportunity to strengthen their party's political standing in advance of the upcoming 1862 Congressional elections if a Republican General, Pope, could do what the Democratic General, McClellan, had failed to do -- lead a Union Army to victory in Virginia.

On 26 June 1862, with the Administration's support for McClellan's Peninsula Campaign waning, Lincoln appointed Pope Commander of the Army of Virginia. This army combined the forces of three existing Virginia commands into a single formation with Pope as its commander. Before assuming those duties, Pope recommended the appointment of his old superior, Henry Halleck, to become General in Chief of the Army. Pope advised Lincoln that Halleck's appointment would ensure that the President continued to receive sage military counsel from "a competent advisor who would put this matter right."⁵⁷ Having received a similar endorsement from retired General Winfield Scott, Lincoln appointed Halleck General in Chief shortly after Pope's appointment to army command. As a former senior subordinate under Halleck in the Western Theater, Pope knew "Old Brains" Halleck had a penchant for making subordinate commanders successful to the point that some "found it difficult to operate without Halleck behind them."⁵⁸ Now at the helm of the Army of Virginia, Pope had the benefit of both a Commander in Chief and a General in Chief who trusted his abilities.

With trust came high expectations, and Pope's calling was formidable. In fact, Pope initially balked at the opportunity to command due to the magnitude of the task Lincoln envisioned for his army. Lincoln asked Pope to forge the forces of three separate corps into a cohesive fighting force, which was to serve several strategic purposes in support of the President's evolving war policy. First, the army provided immediate protection for the capital of Washington to ensure its safety against Confederate raids or attacks. Second, the Army of Virginia provided support to McClellan's Army of the Potomac, which operated on Virginia's Peninsula near Richmond. Lincoln believed the presence of Pope's sizeable army would force the Rebel army to re-position forces from Richmond toward the Shenandoah Valley and the piedmont. McClellan, then faced with a less formidable enemy at Richmond, could seize the Confederate capital with the Army of the Potomac.

Lincoln also viewed Pope's army as a much-needed Union safeguard for the Shenandoah Valley. Tenuously held Union territory in the emerging Union state in the western portion of Virginia as well as Union footholds in Eastern Kentucky and Tennessee required the presence or close proximity of Union forces for security. Additionally, the Valley offered an avenue of approach from which Confederate forces could easily threaten Washington or invade Union territory in Maryland. Both threats worried Lincoln, and the recent agility and speed demonstrated by Jackson's Confederate forces in the Valley gave the President ample reason for concern. Lincoln knew a Confederate assault into Union territory would cause public and political havoc in the North and lead to significant strategic success for the South. Additionally, McClellan's lack of success on the Virginia Peninsula provided the Confederates an

opportunity for just such an invasion. Pope's Army of Virginia was the roadblock Lincoln needed to thwart any Rebel advance toward Northern soil.

While it provided the Union protection from a Confederate invasion, Lincoln did not intend Pope's army merely as a defensive formation. He expected that army to symbolize the Union's new, aggressive strategic direction for the war. The Commander in Chief realized the need "to bring the hard edge of war to the Southern people as a whole," and he further understood that McClellan was incapable of executing such a policy.⁵⁹ Consequently, Lincoln turned to Pope, the offensive-minded victor from the west, to crush the Rebel army and bring intense pressure upon the Confederate ability to sustain the war. Full of bravado, Pope proved the right messenger to convey the intent of Lincoln's new policy, although he would ultimately prove the wrong General to fulfill its execution.

Upon taking command, Pope issued a series of orders announcing harsher military policies under which his army would operate. The orders not only reverberated throughout the Union Army, they sent shock waves across the Confederacy and earned Pope the enmity of the Confederate high command including Lee's label of him as a "miscreant."⁶⁰ Lincoln endorsed Pope's orders which helped initiate a change to the strategic course of the war. So did Congress' passage of the Militia Act authorizing the President to permit "persons of African descent" to serve in the military.⁶¹ Less than two months later, Lincoln would further alter the war's landscape by issuing the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which he deemed a "military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union" and designed to "strike at the heart of the rebellion."⁶²

The perception of the war had changed, and so had Lincoln's national strategic objectives. He now looked to Pope to carry out the revised strategy.

In Pope, Lincoln found a General with whom he shared a common vision. Pope fully supported the Commander in Chief's revised national strategy for the war and endeavored to imbue an offensive, driving spirit in his soldiers. However, the general's communications with his army met harsh resentment from the soldiers and alienated many of them from the start of his command. Although Pope intended these orders to "create a feeling of confidence," his soldiers viewed them as "bombastic and egotistic to an unheard of degree."⁶³ Ironically, in contrast to McClellan, Pope enjoyed the trust and confidence of his superiors but was unable to develop a loyal bond with his subordinate officers and his soldiers. As a result, he "entered upon his campaign heavily handicapped," and the hard feelings felt by his soldiers and subordinate leaders foreshadowed the army's performance at the Second Battle of Bull Run.⁶⁴

Pope struggled as an army commander at Second Bull Run. He lacked clarity and accuracy in orders and failed to properly visualize the enemy or the battlefield.⁶⁵ Confederate forces outmaneuvered and defeated his army. This forced his withdrawal to defensive positions around Washington and resulted in the subsequent transfer of his forces to McClellan's command. Contributing to Pope's failure as an army commander was the perception – or misperception – that his soldiers and subordinate officers did not fully support him in the battle. Pope especially blamed the inferior performance of subordinate commanders who had been transferred from McClellan's army. Pope accused commanders of these units, most pointedly Major General Fitz John Porter who commanded the 5th Corps from McClellan's army, of undermining his command by

disobeying orders or languidly supporting directives during the fight.⁶⁶ Pope also questioned the deliberate manner in which McClellan carried out Halleck's directives to transfer additional forces during the battle. Lincoln, along with Halleck and Stanton, shared Pope's outrage over McClellan's tepid support and ordered a court of inquiry into the matter that ultimately led to Porter's court-martial.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Pope and the Union army were defeated; the Confederates again threatened Washington; and Lincoln faced an expanding crisis as Commander in Chief.

While Lincoln may have questioned the reasons Pope's army failed, what was certain to the President was that Pope could no longer remain at the head of the Army of Virginia or continue to serve in the East. The Commander in Chief realized Pope no longer had the confidence of his soldiers, and the poisonous relationship between Pope and McClellan, as well as other generals of McClellan's army, meant the two army commanders could not continue to coexist in the same theater. "If the country was to be saved, confidence and power could not be bestowed by halves."⁶⁸ Although Lincoln harbored deep concern over McClellan's self-serving performance in not fully supporting a fellow army commander, the President knew that "Little Mac" had the trust of the soldiers. With the Confederates threatening the capital, Lincoln once again turned to him to restore order and spirit to the Army. This decision to maintain McClellan in command was unpopular with the public, the press and even his own Cabinet, but it was, in the President's mind, the best decision for the Union. Above all else, Lincoln knew he needed McClellan to restore order in the East.

The Commander in Chief, however, "never blamed Pope for the three week fiasco that ended at Manassas."⁶⁹ Lincoln still believed in the military capacity of Pope,

who he regarded as a loyal and able subordinate that served honorably in defeat despite the likely subversion of his command. Pope had attempted to implement Lincoln's new war policy with a supportive military strategy and had endeavored to achieve the President's revised national strategic objectives. Moreover, the general had fulfilled Lincoln's desire for an offensive army and had earned Lincoln's appreciation by his willingness to fight. As opposed to his ebbing confidence in McClellan, Lincoln retained trust in Pope and sought to find a place for the general's continued service to the Union. Additionally, the impending Congressional elections necessitated Lincoln's skillful handling of the Republican Pope, lest the President risk a windfall for his political opponents by relieving a general from his own party just two months before the elections. The Commander in Chief knew he could count on Pope to continue to serve with distinction, and Lincoln was in need of the general's service elsewhere.

Elsewhere for Pope would be in the West but not in command of Union forces fighting Confederates. Instead, Lincoln assigned Pope to the newly created Department of the Northwest, an area where Indian uprisings had escalated to crisis proportion in August of 1862, while the Second Bull Run Campaign was raging. The brewing problem in the northwest had the potential to expand into a second war for the Union, one that would draw indispensable manpower and resources away from the fight with the Confederates. The Governor of Minnesota beseeched the President to act against the atrocities committed by the Sioux Indians. "This is not our war," he declared; "it is a national war."⁷⁰ Lincoln fully appreciated the magnitude of the situation and knew it required the services of a capable general to bring calm to a territory that served as a vital supplier of food and manpower for the Union Army.⁷¹

The President thus turned to Pope and placed him in command of the Department of the Northwest. Pope's written orders from Halleck conveyed the President's confidence in the general. The situation, wrote the General in Chief, required a "military officer of high rank, in whose ability and vigor the government has confidence, and you have therefore been selected for this important command."⁷² Though distraught by the prospect of fighting Indians rather than Confederates, Pope nevertheless accepted the command. In a message of acceptance to Secretary of War Stanton, Pope wrote, "you can rely upon my entering with all my heart upon any duty assigned me."⁷³ In command of the Department of the Northwest, Pope quickly ended the violence caused by the Sioux and restored a tenuous calm throughout that critical region of the Union. Viewing this mission as an interlude in his Civil War service, Pope lobbied for a return to fight the Rebel army in the Western Theater.⁷⁴ However, Lincoln and Stanton saw great value in retaining Pope in the northwest to maintain stability; consequently, Pope would remain in command of the Department of the Northwest for the next several years. During this time, Pope became one of the army's foremost experts on Indian affairs and served admirably in maintaining security and order in the western plains. Pope briefly returned to the Civil War in 1865, commanding the Union's Military Division of the Missouri in the waning months of the conflict, and his loyalty and devotion to the nation kept him in service an additional twenty-one years after the war.

The strategic leader relations between President Abraham Lincoln and two of his senior Generals, George McClellan and John Pope, provide ample lessons for consideration by today's strategic leaders. As in the Civil War, today's personal and professional bonds between a President and senior military officers in times of conflict

remain an essential component to achieving the national purpose. Keys to an effective relationship between strategic leaders include establishing mutual bonds of trust, sustaining effective communications and sharing a common vision of policy and its supporting strategy. Beyond those characteristics, strategic leaders must also willingly subordinate personal desires and aspirations to the larger cause for which they serve.

A tenet of strategic leadership theories suggests that relationships matter at the strategic level of leadership, and nowhere is that more imperative than the partnership between Commander in Chief and the general or admiral he selects to fulfill his national policy via the military element of national power. The bond requires a foundation of genuine trust and confidence from both parties and an understanding that personalities play a key role in the relationship. Lincoln and McClellan possessed starkly different personalities. Such differences have caused some historians to believe the relationship was predestined for failure. Even so, Lincoln's penchant for converting rivals into allies offered hope that the two men could become compatriots to the Union cause. However, McClellan rebuffed the President's offers of support, and the general's close-mindedness and condescending attitude toward Lincoln prevented the two leaders from cementing an effective strategic partnership.

Participants in strategic leader relationships must respect the prescribed boundaries of their partnership and acknowledge the authorities and responsibilities vested in their partner. Furthermore, effective strategic bonds require each partner to appreciate and understand the talents the other party brings to the relationship. Indeed, a President needs to be part politician and part soldier, while conversely senior military officers need to be part soldier and part diplomat. A Commander in Chief must

recognize the military expertise and experience of the soldier while additionally understanding the unpredictable nature of warfare, the “realm of chance,” under which generals and admirals carry out national policy.⁷⁵ Likewise, senior military officers must have knowledge of the political realm in which political leaders operate and must appreciate the myriad influences, public and political, that affect a President’s policymaking decisions. The “friction” of war, as Clausewitz called it, is equally applicable to the domains of the military officer and the Commander in Chief.⁷⁶

Presidents and senior military officers who are engaged in strategic leader relationships must also communicate effectively with one another. Today’s elaborate and extensive world of communications capabilities enables strategic leaders to remain in continuous communications regardless of geographical distance. However, instantaneous communications, such as video teleconferencing, is not a panacea for overcoming ineffective communication skills. It is imperative for a Commander in Chief to clearly articulate his views on national strategic policy to his senior military officers. In response, it is incumbent on those officers to provide the President with advice regarding the best use of military force to achieve the strategic objectives and then to devise a military strategy supportive of the President’s national strategy. As well, the general or admiral must keep the President well informed of ongoing military efforts, as the impact of those operations may necessitate a review of national policy objectives. The policy-strategy, or political-military discourse, between a President and his senior military officer requires open, candid, and on-going communications and must maintain a focus on the achievement of the national strategic ends.

In order to achieve a productive national policy-military strategy dialogue a President and his senior military officer must share a common vision of the issue. Strategic leaders must understand the inextricable link between policy and strategy and ensure their views on both topics remain synchronized throughout the process. Clausewitz identified the symbiotic relationship between strategy (or “war” as he referred to it) and policy; strategy is inherently subordinate to policy, but strategy must also inform policy.⁷⁷ McClellan’s lack of success in carrying out his conservative military strategy contributed to the President’s revision of Union grand strategy and the adoption of a “hard war” policy. Despite Lincoln’s revision of policy, McClellan remained resolutely committed to a conciliatory approach to the war. The President, therefore, eventually ended his strategic partnership with McClellan and turned to Pope to implement the new national strategy.

Finally, a successful strategic partnership between a Commander in Chief and senior military officer requires both leaders to subordinate their personal views, opinions, and aspirations in support of the greater cause they serve. Lincoln resolutely maintained restoring the nation as his overarching goal for the war but was willing to alter his views on the ways to achieve that end and even to relent on matters that did not jeopardize the purpose of reunification. McClellan could not subordinate his personal feelings or political orientation to the greater cause, nor was he willing to change his views on the conduct of the war. Though he too desired reunification as a desired end, he could not accept the need for a “hard-war” approach as prescribed by his civilian superior. He refused to change his view of a conciliatory approach to the war

and continually employed military strategy commensurate with his own views, not those of the President.

Both George McClellan and John Pope traveled similar paths in earning Lincoln's confidence and gaining appointment as army commanders. While one succeeded in winning the loyalty of his subordinates, he was reluctant to engage his superior and chose to remain aloof, unyielding, and contemptuous.⁷⁸ The other built amicable and mutually supportive relations with his civilian superior but failed to gain the devotion and loyalty of his soldiers. Both generals lost the confidence of their Commander in Chief in their abilities to command an army in the Eastern Theater but for vastly different reasons. As a result, their careers following that command traveled drastically different paths. The well-intended Pope continued to serve the Union cause for the duration of the conflict and for more than two decades following, while the obstreperous McClellan would never again hold command or serve the Union as a military officer.

President Lincoln's search for a military partner in his strategic leader relationship continued for another year and a half and through several more generals. His persistence would prevail as the President finally found a General, in Ulysses S. Grant, who carried out national policy and achieved the strategic objective of ending the war and restoring the Union. At no time in American history has the strategic partnership between a President and his senior military officer meant more to the survival of the nation than during the four years of the United States Civil War. Although the lessons learned from Lincoln's relationships with McClellan and Pope are nearly a century and a half old, their messages on requirements for effective strategic leadership relationships speak as loudly today as they did in the mid-nineteenth century.

Endnotes

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- ⁶³ John C. Ropes, *The Army Under Pope* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1881), 9.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Cozzens, *General John Pope: A Life for the Nation*, 199-200.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Sutherland, "Abraham Lincoln, John Pope, and the Origins of Total War", 585.

⁷⁰ U.S. Government, *War of the Rebellion*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, Part III 617.

⁷¹ Cozzens, *General John Pope: A Life for the Nation*, 200-201.

⁷² U.S. Government, *War of the Rebellion*, Ser. I, Vol. XII, Part III, 617-618.

⁷³ Ibid., 658.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 767.

⁷⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 101.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁸ Clarence Edward Macartney, *Lincoln and His Generals* (Philadelphia, PA: Dorrance and Company, 1925), 72.